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ABSTRACT

The decision in the Netherlands to teach English as a second language to all students in grades five and six, by the regular class teacher, has implications for the selection of instructional approaches and materials. A clear preference for communication goals in language instruction has been shown in the Netherlands, suggesting a notional/functional syllabus in the primary school. Earlier research has already resulted in a series of objectives for elementary school English language instruction. Materials should include enough redundancy of content to build areas of knowledge, and they must be selected or written to suit the children's stages of cognitive development. They should contain a large variety of text types and exercises to build linguistic competence and sharpen paralinguistic awareness, with the aim of building communication capabilities. Class activities should be diverse, brief, and physical, and they should require cooperation. Teacher training must be adapted to provide instruction in both English language and language teaching methodology, which may be very unfamiliar to regular class teachers. Secondary teacher training institutions may provide assistance here. Fortunately, elementary teachers are eager to upgrade their skills to teach the new curriculum, but interest in the communicative approach is taking a back seat to immediate needs for preparation. (MSE)

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# PRIMARY ENGLISH AND A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

FL 015 926

W.N. de Jong

Why should one opt for a communicative approach with young beginners? I would like to suggest, because this approach is most likely to build up and keep up the motivation of the learners. Young learners appreciate achieving goals. A communicative approach with its recognisable and worth-while short term objectives is therefore more suitable for the young learner than most other syllabuses. Dangling the proverbial carrot of future success before the young learner's eyes obviously does not work very well.

In the following I shall deal with questions such as <u>what</u> young beginners, <u>what</u> communicative approach, given these, <u>what</u> objectives, <u>what</u> conclusions to draw as regards teaching materials and didactics, and offer a few concluding remarks regarding the training of teachers.

The Dutch parliament have decided that from September 1986 onwards all primary schools will teach English in the two final years i.e. in classes 5 and 6. The age-group concerned is about 10 to 12 years old. In Piaget's scheme of cognitive development this means that the learners, generally speaking, are finishing the concrete-operational stage and starting the formal-operations period. "The concrete operations period is characterized by the child's development of internalized, reversible operations which can be applied to attributes of objects to solve problems. The period of formal operations, which an adult may not necessarily complete, is characterized by truly hypothetical thinking as found in formal logic and scientific reasoning." (Bourne, Dominowsky & Loftus, p. 333).

This psychological jargon means that the child in the concrete operations stage has learned that you can change some attributes of an object while leaving others unchanged, e.g. altering a ball of clay into a sausage-shape leaves its weight and its clay-ness intact. Also, this child has some notion of "relationship", e.g. understands a concept like subordination, or that objects may belong to the same class. In the following phase the child will develop abstract thinking, learn to construct a hypothesis and test it systematically.

There are a few points that need emphasising in connection with the above as to behavioral characteristics. Piaget's taxonomy is an approximation, i.e. no actual child of eleven will actually experience the transition from one stage into the other. We are speaking about a process where a child gradually loses the typical attitudes to learning associated with one and adopt the approaches linked with the other stage of development.

Learning language, be it mother-tongue or second language, is assumed to be species-specific and is part of general cognitive development. Psychologically speaking, it would create theoretical problems to treat language acquisition and cognitive development as separate systems functioning in the developing brain. The ability to learn to interact with one's environment using increasingly complex cognitive skills

may well be a peculiarly human endowment. Learning a second language can therefore logically find a place within the Primary School curriculum. A condition following from this point of view is that the subject is taught by the class-teacher (the decision adopted in the new law governing Primary Education in the Netherlands).
This approach has important consequences for the development of language teaching materials, which I shall discuss further on.

A Communicative approach

The problem with this term is that it has different meanings for different people. Rather than open the discussion on what such an approach should ideally imply, I shall state my views in terms of a language teaching curriculum, and assume that the implementation of such a curriculum will quite naturally include a variety of situations in which "social" learning can be practiced.
In essence, a communicative approach, using a notional/functional analysis of the learner's needs for its basis, will teach the learner to behave appropriately in a number of everyday settings.
The place of English in the Dutch context is probably unique in a number of ways. Children hear English daily in the public media - popular songs are mostly sung in English by Dutch, English or American or.... groups; TV-serials are generally subtitled on Dutch TV and not dubbed; all over the Netherlands English-language radio programmes can be received, and television-broadcasts in increasingly large areas of the country. English loanwords and phrases are quite common in everyday language use. The English language is therefore recognized as a normal vehicle of communication by all.
Given the usefulness of knowing English in this context, it follows that young learners will want to adopt this language as part of their everyday experience. This acceptance of English is further stimulated by a preference for short-term goals, which is characteristic of the attitude to learning of this age-group.
On the other hand there are the long-term requirements of the educational system: that all pupils upon fulfilling their compulsory edu-

cation shall be "able to survive, linguistically speaking, as tourists in a foreign country, or in contacts with foreign visitors to their own country", (van Ek, p.2). The specifications of The Threshold Level have been generally accepted in the Netherlands as proper for all learners who leave the system at the age of sixteen. On the basis of this clear preference for communication goals I am in favour of a notional/functional syllabus for the primary school.

Using such a syllabus the Dutch Foundation for Curriculum Development has conducted an experiment in teaching English to Primary School children, as a follow-up of an earlier one using a structural syllabus. The results of this experiment are widely available in a number of publications in the Dutch language.
The topic-areas used in the above experiment were personal identification, the classroom, house and home, hobbies and free time, pets, shopping (for chothes), travel, food and drink and television. The language functions taught were mainly those developed in Waystage English (van Ek, et al., 1977): imparting and seeking factual information, expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes, expressing and finding out emotional attitudes, expressing moral attitudes, getting things done and socializing.
Clearly the English taught in this project aimed at teaching the foreign langage for use at home, or on holiday in other countries rather than in the British Isles . There is much to be said for this approach since the number of Dutch people that yearly takes a holiday in Great Britain is relatively small. Consequently the chances of meeting native speakers of English outside their natural environment are much greater.
The foundation for Curriculum Development has suggested objectives for English language teaching in the primary school. These concern (1) the positive attitude learners should adopt towards learning a foreign language, (2) awareness of the role of the English language in Dutch society both in the social and the cultural sphere, and (3) levels of achievement in speaking, listening, reading and writing. These are

then worked out in terms of notions one can express in certain contexts. Examples are given of exponents that might be used, or what types of authentic texts the learner may be able to cope with. An important footnote is added concerning the use that can be made of these objectives: they should not be understood as statements about levels of competence, and should not be used to select pupils for the various types of secondary education (which says more about the quality of secondary than of primary education).

Requirements of Teaching materials

Children in the age range concerned will experience the onset of puberty usually before they move on to secondary education. "The way of life of a ten-year-old is normally harmonious and well balanced, and (....) this well-integrated pattern is broken up in the twelfth giving way to uneasiness and anxiety." (Sandström, p.220). The same source says "... the integrated personality of the ten-year-old child points forward to adaptation to the world of grown-ups. (.....) the child of ten is very receptive to social and cultural influences. He often has considerable social intelligence....." (p. 62). Bourne, Dominowsky & Loftus in their discussion of cognitive development draw attention to factors such as memory span - "Memory tasks place greater demands on attention, and younger children might 'remember worse' because they attended less well in the first place" (p. 313)-, rehearsal strategies - "the older child (and adult) is more likely to rehearse and to construct larger chunks by using a cumulative rehearsal strategy" (p. 315) -, organisation - "older children are much more likely to use a grouping strategy (e.g. when learning a categorized word list), spontaneously" (p. 317) than younger children. Older children perceive causality better than younger ones and understand adult explanations easier (cf. p.329).

Concerning language acquisition the writers have this to say: "Children typically understand more about language than is apparent in the speech they themselves produce. As language development proceeds,

children appear to move from a receptive phase to a more productive phase; this transition appears to depend on the development of cognitive skills which are not well understood at this time". (p. 334)
It seems clear from this that language teaching materials may look forward to a life in the adult world. They can make use of the child's social and cultural insights, although tasks along those lines may overtax his reasoning powers. Materials should be recycled regularly in order to allow the building up of chunks of knowledge: i.e. the same language materials should be presented in novel situations regularly. Also, they should not tax the learner's memory span overmuch ; obviously, to prevent dropping out.
This, of course, influences the choice of texts a teacher might wish to offer his pupils, and also of exercises, activities, etc., he might wish to use. In general, one might say that perhaps the teacher's best approach might be lots of short bursts of a variety of activities around short texts.
Apart from the traditional texts found in textbooks nowadays such as dialogues, short monologues, narratives, etc., which might, hopefully, "convey a real message of some sort" (Morrow 1977), I would like to see extensive use made of other authentic materials such as (nursery) rhymes, riddles, songs, cartoons, advertising texts, etc. The trouble is that so often textbooks are needlessly restrictive, when there is so much available.
In the field of devising exercise material the spirit of adventure also is notably absent from most textbooks. One finds endless drills, sometimes disguised as dialogue exercises, sometimes as games, but real communication is often absent. All too often the textbook writer confronted with a lack of ideas escapes into a writing exercise which repeats the drills already presented. There is no problem as to the presentation of these materials. All textbooks for the primary school are attractively produced; my criticism concerns the contents .
The best textbooks nowadays fortunately offer more and better texts, communication exercises, etc. The view of language presented, however, might well be called materialistic, since basically it is all aimed at

understanding the text, reproducing it and finally integrating its "patterns" into the learner's competence. Even the best-devised information gap exercise or built-in disagreement game often only aims at developing communicative ability on the level of exchanging "technical" information. "Perhaps, to emancipate signals from immediate emotional impulse, the stimulus of discussing technical matters was necessary. But now we may hope to use the subtlety and power of language for true communication about our emotions" (Russell & Russell, p. 191).

Of course, I do not wish to discard what has been achieved as a preparation for "discussing technical matters" in a foreign language. I wish to make a plea for the development of exercises to train "true communication about our emotions" and for the inclusion of such in FLT materials.

For many years now people have been aware of non-verbal features of language use in face to face interaction. Whole new fields of study, such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, ethno-methodology, the ethnography of speaking, have been developed to study the more social aspects of communication. The translation of the discoveries made in these fields into language teaching methodology is a slow process, but it is taking place. There is the work of Alan Maley, Alan Duff and their colleagues, who have published collections of materials for the training of listening comprehension, oral skills, reading and writing which all make use of well-known Gestalt-like tendencies of humans to stimulate communication. There are the materials produced by Colin Mortimer to train the perception and production of rhythm and intonation; and the ideas developed by Bryan Jenner and Barbara Bradford. There is the work discussed by Philip Riley (1980) on the use of television to develop an awareness of the problems inherent in face to face interaction across linguistic boundaries; the discussion on the use of television in various language teaching publications (e.g. Schwartz 1983).

There is all this going on, but very little of it is found in textbooks for beginners so far. The problem is that virtually all the writers mentioned are concerned with the teaching of post-intermediate and ad-

vanced learners of English as a foreign language. It is about time that textbook writers for beginners picked up the message.

So, having made this point, what do I wish to find in a coursebook for 10-12 year-old children? It should contain a large variety of text-types and exercises, which on the one hand build up the learner's linguistic competence and on the other sharpen his paralinguistic awareness, perhaps both consciously and subconsciously. The learner at this stage is now at an age where he may appreciate and understand formal explanations and rules, although obviously this should not be overemphasised.

The aim is to build up communication: therefore the work at this beginning level should start from reception and lead to production through a series of carefully organised exercises (see: Candlin 1981). At this level it would perhaps not matter overmuch if actual production does not yet go beyond the use of "routines and patterns", i.e. the standardized phrases learnt from the dialogues used as input-material. It is very important however that the learner gains insight in his own analytical powers as soon as possible. Real communication, even if only observed or heard, offers so many possibilities to gain insights into motives, relationships, roles, settings, and so on, that it would be wasteful not to try and put the learner's intuitions about these things to work while he is mastering a foreign language.

There should be much diversity of activities in the class, particularly of those lasting a short time with an eye to the shorter memory span of the children. Also, the linguistic content should be recycled regularly to aid its retention in the learner's long-term memory. As much as possible, activities should be physical, with lots of singing, acting, moving about, etc., and at the same time require the cooperation of other children, be it the whole class or smaller groups. This, by the way, will not present serious difficulties in the Dutch primary school, as most teachers regularly use groupwork activities these days anyway.

How to prepare the teachers?

Teacher training in the Netherlands is traditionally separated into preparing for a career in the primary and in the secondary field. Primary teacher training does not yet, and did not in the past, include English in the curriculum. Nevertheless, the new Education Law requires that English is taught by the class teacher (and consequently not by an outsider, subject-teacher).

Various programmes have been set up to provide for in-service training of the teachers. Most of these contain a language skills component, and a methodology and didactics part. Since the government has an obvious responsibility for the quality of these programmes, it takes an interest in the financing and content of these. It has therefore made money available to set up a centrally controlled multi-media course for the teaching of English in the Primary School. This involves the use of radio and television (5 hours each in 10 broadcasts of 30 minutes), a follow-up by various teacher training institutions (both primary and secondary) of 20 hours, and 10 hours set aside for private study.

Although every primary school teacher has been taught English (for about 5 years on an average), there is no reason to assume that they still have a command of English sufficiently error-free to be able to act as a model for their learners. Will twenty hours suffice to recall their former fluency (if any) and at the same time make them aware of new developments in modern language teaching which they may totally unaware of? It seems to me that for most teachers this amount of time will be absolutely insufficient. The only alternative seems to be to develop courses that are teacher-proof, and perhaps this is what the government hopes for in these impecunious days. But, if time and money are only minimally available, how can one expect teachers to accept programmes based on a methodology they are totally unfamiliar with? What might seem an advantage perhaps, is that the teachers are thoroughly familiar with the learners they are going to teach English, not only from a theoretical point of view, but also definitely in a practical sense. This familiarity is an advantage when it comes to

the selection of teaching materials . The disadvantage lies in the fact that, traditionally, language teaching theory has paid scant attention to findings in the field of the psychology of learning and teaching. Consequently, much of the textbook market is filled with materials showing, in varying degrees, weaknesses in a number of directions. Will primary school teachers be able to adapt textbooks to their own requirements? And who is going to show them how to go about this job?

Perhaps there is scope for initiatives on the part of teacher training establishments for secondary education, which have an interest in didactic and methodological continuity in the teaching of English. Past experience predicts disaster unless measures are taken to guarantee the continuity.

Fortunately many primary school teachers do realise their shortcomings and lack of preparation for the job ahead. They flock in large numbers to courses offering to give them this much-needed training. Perhaps, in due time English in the primary school curriculum will be taught on the basis of a communicative approach: the teachers are willing, but lack sufficient competence at this time; coursebooks are being produced, but those that aim at being teacher-proof are mainly structure-based; the pupils are very enthusiastic and keen to learn. Let's hope that the system manages to keep this motivation alive.

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